

The swimmer

A close-up photograph of a swimmer's arm and hand cutting through the water, creating a splash. The swimmer's arm is extended forward, and the hand is just below the surface. The water is dark blue, and the background shows a blurred city skyline with tall buildings under a clear sky.

THE
CUTTING
EDGE

Marathon swimmer Suzanne Heim training for the dangerous Farallones-S.F. 33-mile swim.



By Norman Melnick

It is 21 years since Ted Erikson, a Chicago research chemist, swam from the Farallon Islands in the open Pacific to the Golden Gate Bridge—the first and only swimmer ever to cover the 33 grueling, freezing, shark-infested miles. In that time there have been relay races from the Farallones but no solos. After Erikson, who received extensive media coverage, no money and fleeting fame, the natorial equivalent of climbing Mount Everest stopped, and the elephant seals and the great white

Photographs by Kim Komenich

sharks regained their exclusive habitat. Even the lonely Coast Guard outpost on the islands closed.

But now, a new generation of marathon swimmers, lighter, faster, a shade more pragmatic perhaps but with the same grit and determination as their predecessors, is feeling the lure of this "almost godlike" swim.

Like Everest, the Farallones-to-San Francisco is everywhere regarded as the summit achievement—the American Super Swim—transcending all others in distance, adverse conditions and sudden danger.

"It's almost godlike to complete a swim like that," says Bob Roper, ex-president of the South End Rowing and Swimming Club at Aquatic Park, "and I'll tell you why. Fear. Fear of one thing, the ultimate eating machine, the great white shark. And that's the challenge."

A bay swimmer for more than 60 years, Phil Hunter says: "It's much, much tougher than the English Channel. I would call it a tremendous challenge: brutal water temperatures down rather low, the current to contend with, three tide changes, and never knowing what's underneath you, like a shark. It's the most grueling swim a person can imagine."

Starting at the Southeast Farallon, the largest island in the chain that is part of the city and county of San Francisco, the swimmer plunges into the Pacific usually at the bewitching hour of 1 a.m., when it is calmest. It is late summer or early fall. The seals clamber in the surf. Screeching cormorants grub for food.

As the hours tick away, the scraping of a man's bearded chin on his chest becomes almost intolerable. Cramps set in. Pain from muscle fatigue accelerates. Portuguese men-of-war, fiendish stingers, float below the surface. The "red tide," scum on the surface, bars the swimmer's path.

Salt water intake inhibits swallowing even liquid food. There is a urinary crisis. Hawaiian Ike Papke, a nearly 300 pound former marathoner, swelled up "like a helium balloon," recalls a member of his support team, San Francisco longshoreman Stan Hlynsky.

But above all, it is the cold that ultimately seeps through the grease no matter how much is applied. The continued stroking pumps blood into the muscles, but that may only mask what is really happening: the body's core is cooling at a racehorse clip; disorienting, life-threatening hypothermia is setting in. Leonore Modell, a Sacramento teen-ager and a born marathoner, was hauled from the ocean only five miles from shore in the 1960s. Her support team could see the car headlights from welcomers on the beach. But Modell wasn't going anywhere; her body temperature had dipped to a dangerously low 92.

San Francisco schoolteacher Myra Thompson, whose Farallones attempts after World War II started the modern tradition, was only a mile and a quarter from shore when she had to give up in 1957. For 18 hours she had been slammed by roaring winds, swells and a rain squall that had churned up the bitterly cold bottom water.

The finish is Aquatic Park and three, four steps up the



beach without help. No one has done that yet. That is the Farallones swim, as purists define it. Ted Erikson, whose time on Sept. 17, 1967, was 14 hours and 36 minutes, got the farthest and is accepted as a finisher. In the same year Lt. Col. Stewart Evans of Boston, wracked with pain, ended up at Duxbury Point in Marin, 17 miles north of the Golden Gate.

"Oh yes, it's on my list," says the powerful Suzanne Heim of San Rafael, a special education teacher who is considered one of the finest women distance swimmers in the world. She is speaking about the Farallones. Tall, solidly built, 30 years old, she has conquered and reconquered every bay swim, including the 27-mile stretch between the Carquinez Strait and the Golden Gate and the 30 miles between the Richmond-San Rafael and San Mateo-Hayward bridges. She has cruised the churlish waters between the north and south towers of the Golden Gate Bridge many times, roundtrip.

"The Farallones is the ultimate test or the ultimate risk," she says. "I've done the (English) Channel three times. I don't want to do it over and over. I want to move on to something else."

"The Farallones is intriguing. You have to put your mind in one gear and go for it. It means you're willing to deal with the variables Mother Nature throws at you."

Another Bay Area challenger is Paul Asmuth, a certified public accountant from Santa Rosa, the king of



Suzanne Heim: "The Farallones is the ultimate test . . . or risk."

professional swimmers. At 6-foot-1 and 165 pounds, he typifies the new breed. Minus the blubber, they swim faster and get to the end-point sooner. Moving water and not just gliding through it, they keep the body heat up.

Asmuth, 31, is also interested in the Farallones. He has amassed the most points of any pro in seven of the last eight years. He earns up to \$15,000 a year on the circuit, which reaches from Atlantic City to Egypt and from Argentina to Canada. "I can swim a mile using less calories than if I walked," he says. He is formidable.

Jon Erikson, Ted Erikson's son, who turns 34 on Sept. 6, was the first marathoner to complete a three-way swim of the English Channel in 1981. Now he has company—record-breaker Phil Rush. A resident of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., Jon Erikson was raised to manhood on his father's accomplishment and has a healthy respect for it. He says he considers the triple Channel swim (63 total miles) less intimidating than the Farallones one way.

Jon Erikson and Asmuth, both pros, want a consideration for doing the swim. Asmuth explains that he'd have to prepare over a whole summer. "It would take a tremendous amount of energy, money, and on top of everything, it's very dangerous." But as the Farallones is the greatest challenge, it is also the most under-valued.

The premier endurance swimmer in the world today is Phil Rush of Lower Hutt, New Zealand, a little town near Wellington, the capital. No less an authority than Ray

Scott, the chairman of the august (English) Channel Swimming Association the last 28 years, says so. His wife Audrey, association secretary for 15 years, agrees.

Rush, who is training to be a life insurance agent, set the record last year for the three-way swim of the Channel, a brisk 28 hours and 22 minutes, nonstop. He chopped 10 hours off Jon Erikson's time. Rush and Erikson are the only swimmers to execute the triple.

Tony Keenan, Rush's coach and manager, also of Lower Hutt, says: "If anybody can do the Farallones, Phil can. Speak to the top professionals. Phil's at his best when the winds are howling, the water temperature is low and the seas are the roughest."

Rush, 24, belies the myth of size. He is only 5-foot-7 and 160 pounds. Keenan calls him "compact." He has what the fraternity calls a mighty stroke. The numbers are daunting: 80 arm strokes and 120 to 130 leg strokes a minute. The 5-foot-11, 195-pound Ted Erikson did 60 arm strokes a minute. Old-time members of the venerable Dolphin Club at Aquatic Park sit at the wind protector on their private beach and say Rush is maybe the best ever and certain to be the first to crack the four-way swim of the English Channel. He has what Frank Drum calls "that real deep down reserve . . . to stroke, stroke, stroke, like a machine."

Rush says he's "very keen" to do the Farallones. He wants "to have a look at it first." With boyish brio he says: "You know, you're always looking for new challenges." Fear of sharks? "If they get you, they get you."

A few hours into his swim, "damn cold, birds squawking, the old foghorn still going," and Ted Erikson heard two gunshots. "I reared up. I was scared. I figured sharks. I said to my coach, Dave Kinley, 'Anything wrong, Dave?' and he said, 'No, no, no, keep swimming.'" Learning the truth later, Erikson shuddered.

The director of the California Academy of Sciences in Golden Gate Park, John McCosker, says the great white population is up considerably at the Farallones ("I've been scuba diving there—I was very nervous"), drawn by the abundance of elephant seals now protected by federal law from human harm if not from sharks.

What is the probability of an attack? "I can't answer that in actual numbers," says McCosker, "but most intelligent people wouldn't roll the dice."

Diddo Clark, a Martinez attorney and another marvelous Bay Area distance swimmer (twice around Manhattan Island in New York), says she will heed McCosker. She proclaims: "The ocean off the Farallones is the shark-attack capital of the world. The legal consequences are that swimming (there) is an ultra-hazardous activity and liability that might hold in other cases won't fit this."

Exercise king Jack LaLanne, a prodigious swimmer himself, says it takes "a certain type of cat" to be a marathon swimmer, "a real tough cat. It's so lonesome out there. Nobody knows about it; it's you against you." Paul Asmuth observes: "You have to enjoy being alone with yourself. If not, you're not going to make it."

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Most of them receive what Heim calls "personal satisfaction." Lynne Cox, a free-lance writer of Los Alamitos in Southern California, who amazed the Russians and the Eskimos when she successfully crossed the Bering Strait between Alaska and the Soviet Union in 43-degree water, swims to do research for how-to articles in magazines. Ted Erikson, who is 60 now and a high school science teacher in Hammond, Ind., works off "nervous energy."

But the answers do not really satisfy. Perhaps there is no answer, only irresistible urges and compulsions that surpass understanding. A body of water exists; someone aims to swim across it.

Still, it is probably as the wily New Zealander Keenan states: "You either have it or you don't." This is not an acquired taste. The water temperature at the Farallones hovers at the 56-degree mark. In it half the survivors of a shipwreck will perish in two hours. Papke recalls pulling Ted Erikson from the water after his first assault on the Farallones in 1966: "He was swimming in all directions and we could tell it was time to get him. He didn't object. In fact he didn't say anything. I don't know if he could have said anything."

Rush recalls that he stopped after the second of his three Channel crossings for more grease on the back of his neck. The constant head-turning had rubbed the skin off. "It eased the pain a little, you know, but not really."

LaLanne, the septuagenarian strongman, says these are extraordinary athletes. Courage, an indomitable spirit, are rooted in their makeup, along with a stubborn streak. Ted Erikson goes "into a trance" while swimming. "You don't think about it. Your mind's on the end, not on quitting. You always ask yourself, What will stop me? If I have a bad feeding, I'll throw up but I'll go on. If I have pain, I'll go out of body but I'll keep on swimming. There's only one excuse I can come up with. Death. If I killed myself, I'd stop." ■

Norman Melnick is a staff writer at The Examiner.